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The perfect fit? Being both volunteer and ethnographer in a UK foodbank

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore both volunteer and ethnographer in a Trussell Trust foodbank in Stockton-on-Tees, North East England during a period of welfare reform and austerity. It shows how ethnographic researchers can develop a more effective qualitative understanding of foodbank use through volunteering.

Design/methodology/approach – The methodological design was ethnographic both in terms of data collection and analysis. Volunteering and participant observation began in November 2013 and is ongoing. The data presented are derived from field notes of participant observations.

Findings – Tensions are present when considering how best to write up ethnographic research when the researcher adopts a “volunteer ethnographer” role. The negotiation of relationships, practices, and emotions requires the researcher to appreciate the complex and “politicized” discourse surrounding foodbank use in order to report how the foodbank operates in an objective yet truly reflective way.

Originality/value – There is an expanding research interest in the growth of foodbanks. This paper offers unique insights into the value and tensions of adopting the dual role of “volunteer ethnographer” when researching foodbank use in the UK.

Keywords Boundaries, Emotion, Foodbank, Reflexive, Trussell Trust, Volunteer

Introduction

This paper is based on an ethnographic account of a Trussell Trust foodbank in Stockton-on-Tees, North East England. This paper focuses specifically on the unique dual role of volunteer and ethnographer I adopted to study foodbank use. Increasing food poverty and insecurity in the UK has led to emergency food provision becoming an ever more prominent feature of the welfare landscape. In 2014, over one million people in the UK received emergency food from a Trussell Trust foodbank, up 19 per cent on 2013. Increases in foodbank use were even higher in more deprived areas such as the North East of England where the number of children needing emergency food aid has doubled in the last year (Trussell Trust, 2015). The Trussell Trust is a large, national, Christian foodbank franchise in the UK that operates a voucher system for those seeking emergency food provisions. Vouchers are provided by referring care agencies such as General Practitioners (GPs), Citizen’s Advice Bureau, or social workers. Foodbank users bring their “red voucher” to a foodbank where it can be redeemed for three days emergency food provision. The food parcel contains “a minimum of three days nutritionally balanced, non-perishable food” such as cereal, tinned soup, tinned vegetables, pasta sauce, long life milk, tea or coffee, pasta, rice, juice, and other basic staple items.

The Trussell Trust describes itself as “a Christian charity that does not affiliate itself with any political party”. Despite this, foodbank use has become highly politically controversial. Largely, the discussion

on increased foodbank use has drifted towards two polarized political arguments, either blaming the poor for making “poor choices”, or blaming welfare cuts and an aggressive sanctioning regime (All Party Parliamentary Group, 2014; Perry et al., 2014). Trussell Trust (2015) statistics have shown the role of welfare reform in foodbank use, with benefits sanctions, delays and low incomes being the most cited reasons for accessing a foodbank. Despite rising numbers of people accessing emergency food provision, the government has struggled to explain why foodbank use has risen, and continue to dismiss the links between welfare reform and foodbank use. As a result, the Trussell Trust have been involved in debates surrounding the “politicization of poverty”, with Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith accusing the organization of “scaremongering” and attacking their messaging as being “political”.

There is an obvious lack of literature relating to volunteering ethnography. Much ethnographical research has documented the role of volunteers within organizations (Bloom and Kilgore, 2003; Martin, 2013; Lois, 2001; Portacolone, 2015; Wharton, 1991; and so on) but few draw specifically upon the role of the volunteer ethnographer. One exception is Tinney (2008, p. 222) who, in her role as a nursing home volunteer ethnographer, emphasizes the importance of maintaining boundaries and stresses that “this includes preservation of both physical and emotional energy, so that even when need is perceived, it cannot always be met”. This is particularly relevant to the role of volunteer ethnographer within a foodbank setting. This paper reflects upon how I have negotiated my role as both volunteer and ethnographer within the tense discourse and rhetoric surrounding growing foodbank use in the UK, whilst attempting to manage and maintain boundaries.

Research context and methodology

The research reported here was part of a wider five year research project examining localized patterns of health inequality in Stockton-on-Tees, North East England. This reflections presented here are drawn from an urban ethnography of health inequalities in two contrasting wards of Stockton-on-Tees. Outside of London, Stockton-on-Tees has the highest level of health inequality in the UK. Life expectancy for both men and women is lower than the England average; life expectancy is 16.4 years lower for men and 11.4 years lower for women in the most deprived areas of Stockton-on-Tees than in the least deprived areas (Association of Public Health Observatories, 2014). These figures are indicative of a wider contrast within Stockton-on-Tees in terms of deprivation. The borough therefore has a unique social and economic mix, with areas of disadvantage situated alongside areas of affluence.

The project began in August 2013, and following three months of familiarization with the area and the issues facing those in the most deprived area of the borough, it was decided fieldwork would begin in a local foodbank. Previous ethnographic research on foodbanking in Canada has focused on the collection and analysis of observational and interview data in 15 foodbanks (Tarasuk and Eakin, 2003, p. 1507). Our study was interested in the health of people who access the foodbank and how they experience their health in an area characterized by vast health inequalities. Goffman (1989, p. 125) in particular insists that field research involves “subjecting yourself, your own body and your own personality, and your own social situation, to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation, or their work situation”. I wanted to become fully immersed within the foodbank

setting and one way to achieve this was to become a fully trained volunteer at a foodbank in order to conduct this stage of the ethnographic fieldwork.

The Trussell Trust foodbank operates from an Evangelical Church in Stockton-on-Tees Town Centre. One of the key reasons I chose a Trussell Trust foodbank as a site for the research was due to the referral system. As I was going to be carrying out the volunteer role as well as the research, I felt it would be highly unethical to make judgements as to whether someone should be given emergency food assistance or not. Other foodbank provision required volunteers to make a judgement on who should be entitled to food, and who should not – this was not a role I wanted to occupy, not least as a researcher but also as a volunteer. With the red voucher system operated by the Trussell Trust, people are referred by agencies they are working with, such as Citizen's Advice Bureau, or their GP, who therefore make the decision to refer to Trussell Trust.

Getting in

Initially I was unsure how my request to become a "volunteer ethnographer" would be received by the foodbank. After getting in touch with the foodbank manager and explaining the project I was working on, she invited me to come along to the foodbank on the following Wednesday. As Wednesday drew closer, I realised I felt quite nervous. I have never volunteered before, nor done ethnographic research. Neither am I familiar with being in a church setting. The first thing I noticed when I walked in was the informal and relaxed atmosphere. Six tables were set out across the room, each with four chairs and covered in pink, white and orange check tablecloths. On top of each table there was a plate of biscuits and a small crystal glass bowl of sugar. A woman with a young child in a pushchair is sat talking to a woman who I assume is a volunteer, and who I shortly discover is the foodbank manager, Angie.

Angie takes me to a room towards the back of the church where this is a small kitchen and a few chairs for the other volunteers, who are all busy making cups of tea or coffee for people who have come for a food parcel. There is a small table as you enter the room to the left which has all of the foodbank paperwork on it. Red vouchers, folders with referring agencies details in, and forms outlining exactly what to put into the food parcels are laid out on in piles. Biscuits are waiting on small pretty plates ready to take out when the plates on the tables in the front room are empty. There are eight volunteers today, mainly older women, and all church goers. Angie led me upstairs to a room which also doubles up as the destination for the Thursday night youth group. Towards the back of the room is a tiny cupboard lined with shelves of food, organized into "Cereal", "Baked Beans", "Fish", "Fruit", and so on. After explaining what the research wants to look at, and that I would like to become a volunteer as well as doing my research there, Angie gives me a confidentiality form to complete. As soon as my University ethics approval comes through, I am ready for my first shift.

Following the approval of my ethics application, I began volunteering in December 2013. I volunteered at the foodbank on a weekly (sometimes twice weekly) basis and participated fully in all aspects of foodbank operations. The volunteering role included preparation of food parcels, distributing food parcels to users, liaising with referring agencies, and administration of the red vouchers that all foodbank users are required to obtain in order to receive emergency food provision. As the weeks passed, I made sure my observations covered all major activities of the

foodbank (e.g. set-up, receipt of food, administration of the red voucher system, engaging with foodbank users, dealing with referral agencies, being involved in the bi-annual supermarket collections, food distribution, tidying up). My identity as a researcher was made known to all foodbank users, volunteers and referral agencies. Participation was voluntary, confidential, and secured by informed consent. Sometimes people who accessed the foodbank were interested in my role as a researcher, but mostly they were more interested in my role as foodbank volunteer, and how I can help them.

Data collection and ethics

The role of volunteer ethnographer was beneficial in terms of my research goals, as it allowed me to see activities conducted by staff members that are not part of official programmes or events. The informal, day-to-day interactions of staff and clients held a great deal of interest for me; in these “ordinary” encounters of clients and staff, the mission of the organization is negotiated and mediated (Martin, 2014, p. 19). Field notes were taken before, during, and immediately after volunteering in the foodbank and included observations, conversations, and reflexive experiences and focus on the material environment, appearance and behaviour of foodbank users and volunteers, and interaction (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). In total, 76 unstructured interviews with foodbank users (56), volunteers (12) and referral agencies (8) have also been undertaken. Interviews with foodbank users typically lasted between 15 and 90 minutes and took place either within the foodbank or at a later date in participants’ homes. Interviews that took place in the foodbank were not digitally recorded; instead, detailed notes were taken immediately afterwards. Observational notes and interview transcripts have been analysed with the assistance of qualitative data analysis software NVivo 10.

Ethical considerations were respected throughout the research, with the research being approved in advance by Durham University, Department of Geography Ethics Committee. Asking individual participants to sign consent forms did not feel very meaningful in the context of the foodbank, a reflection also commented on by Watts (2008). Instead, information sheets were provided which include a description of the research, taking care to refer to the research as well as the volunteer features of my role, which has contributed to sound ethical conduct.

Findings

Tensions are present when considering how best to write up ethnographic research when the researcher adopts a “volunteer ethnographer” role. The negotiation of relationships, practices and emotions requires the researcher to appreciate the complex and “politicized” discourse surrounding foodbank use in order to report how the foodbank operates in an objective yet truly reflective way. To reflect upon my role as both volunteer and ethnographer, I use several examples from field notes of participant observations and extracts from my field diary.

Fitting in

Through ethnography, researchers can discover the complexities of foodbank use and the lived experience of food poverty and insecurity. Volunteering in a foodbank can therefore be an extremely useful approach to investigate the way in which foodbanks are used and how they operate. Not only does volunteering demonstrate the researcher’s commitment to the cause and

the local area, it also provides a space in which to form relationships that are not solely focused on the researchers' needs and objectives. Instead, emphasis is shifted towards what the foodbank users and volunteers need. Participant observation as an ethnographic research method connects well the dual roles of volunteer and researcher and allows for a flexible, responsive approach to a range of situations within the research setting (Sharkey and Larsen, 2005, p. 186). Despite my attempts to fit in, there are certain ways in which I can be viewed as an outsider in the foodbank context.

As I do not have and never have had a religious background, to the other volunteers I do not suppose I could ever be considered a full "insider" as I lack this shared experience and perspective. The following extract from my field notes describes the events of the morning of my first shift at the foodbank:

Field Notes

6 December 2013

It's my first day today, and I'm feeling quite nervous. Deciding what to wear was a bit tricky, so I settled on jeans and a jumper as that's what most of the other volunteers were wearing when I came in last time [...] I arrive early, 9.45 a.m. [it opens at 10 a.m.]. I noticed they were all sat on chairs in a circle but didn't think anything of this at first. Then Angie came in and said we would start with a prayer – ok, I thought, she is going to pray and we will listen. Angie started off by praying and we all bowed our heads. When Angie finished, Maureen started praying and I realised I was in a prayer circle! I haven't said a prayer since I was forced to at primary school and I certainly don't consider myself in the least bit religious. Everyone else slowly took their turn then it got to me, and I realised they all were waiting for me to do a prayer. I managed to say something about people living in poverty and how hard it was, especially at Christmas time [...] I felt a little bit on the back foot after this as not only was it embarrassing and unexpected, I felt they shouldn't have just expected me to join in the praying as I had never indicated I was religious. Then again, the more I reflected on this, maybe they assumed if I was volunteering in a foodbank in a church that I shared their religious perspectives? Once the prayer circle was over I was able to get on with making the food parcels with Angie upstairs.

Following this experience, I realised I had two options – either raise it with the foodbank manager and say I am not religious, thus singling myself out further from a group I am trying to integrate with; or alternatively, arrive a few minutes later to avoid the praying. I opted for the latter as I felt at this stage it was necessary to try to blend in as much as possible, and by my absence at prayer time I assumed they would realize that I am not religious. Neither Angie nor the other volunteers raised this as an issue, and during the 18 months of fieldwork it was never questioned. Arber (2006) has discussed implications of being a researcher and a practitioner when carrying out an ethnographic research study within a hospice in the UK. She found that "the researcher requires a degree of self management and sometimes emotional labour to fit into the research setting, manage relationships and deal with untoward situations with some skill while maintaining the balancing act across the insider outsider boundary" (2006, p. 15). Equally, the identity slippage that comes with the experience of forming new attachments and yet feeling quite alien to the research setting can cause stress and anxiety for the researcher (Wengle, 1988). Emerson et al. (2011) note that some ethnographers seek to do field research by doing and becoming – to the extent possible – whatever it is they are interested in learning about.

Ethnographers, for example, have joined churches or religious groups (Jules-Rosette, 1975; Rochford, 1985) on the grounds that by becoming members they gain fuller insight and understanding into these groups and their activities. As my interest was primarily focused on the foodbank, I felt it was inappropriate to become a part of the church in terms of attending services, for example, when I did not have a religious desire to do so.

Prioritizing my responsibilities as both a volunteer and ethnographer has at times proved challenging. In my volunteer role, I always aim to work around what is best for the foodbank. When I first contacted the foodbank, I had envisaged myself volunteering on Wednesdays rather than Fridays, yet they needed more volunteers on a Friday so I agreed. On occasion, when other volunteers are either on holiday or unwell, I will try to do both a Wednesday and a Friday to help out. I have taken part in the foodbank supermarket collections at Tesco which involved a full day of handing out leaflets, packing donated items, and generally helping run the collection. Sometimes it is difficult to reconcile the two roles of volunteer and researcher. Often, the volunteer self appears to overshadow the research self, with the latter appearing to be of minimal relevance to my role and to foodbank users. Frank (2004) observes how it can be difficult to keep your balance on a boundary in that we can fall back in to ourselves or forward into the other.

Writing this paper, it took me a while to decide whether I should call myself a “volunteer ethnographer” or “ethnographic volunteer” – deciding which role should come first was difficult. I chose “volunteer ethnographer” as when I am at the foodbank, despite the fact I am carrying out research, to the foodbank users primarily I am a volunteer who will provide them with the emergency food aid they need. Having said that, I have to constantly remind myself that although I am a volunteer, the main reason I began doing so was because of the research I am carrying out. On occasion I have not been mindful enough of this, as the following extract from my field notes shows:

Field notes

28 February 2014

After a chaotic few weeks, and then a week off whilst I was in Bilbao, I've come back to find Bryan and Ronnie saying they will work upstairs packing the food today to give me a rest! I'm grateful for that as I haven't been able to chat to anyone these past couple of weeks very often, and plus it will save my legs and back from aching! I had just written this down in my notebook and left it open on the table – school boy error! – and Carol read it and laughed. I'll remember to keep my notebook closed from now on [...]

Emotion, anxieties, and attachments

The emotional burden of being a foodbank volunteer is also something that needs to be reflected upon. In general therefore, a researcher's emotional journey tends to be seen as “embarrassing” and “to be avoided” in the final text (Lutz, 1988, p. 41). Given that ethnographic research necessarily involves a prolonged, intensive immersion in a new social setting, and given ethnography's long-standing concern with self-reflexivity, it is particularly surprising that emotions do not feature more prominently in this type of research (Brannan, 2011). Gilmore and Kenny (2015) emphasize how the research experience can be filled with anxiety, a strong sense of attachment, warmth and belonging

to the organization along with a related aversion to discussing this in later writing, and feelings of guilt upon departure – also see Lindemann (2010), Tracy (2004),

Gilmore and Kenny (2015, p. 17) note that “the activity of work was key to this, and we saw the pleasure that attended it”. Like Gilmore and Kenny found, for me, volunteering in the foodbank has been a very rewarding experience, and one that I find difficult to leave behind having exited the field.

Enacting the volunteer role has at times been very challenging, both physically and emotionally. The supply driven nature of foodbank use can mean that the needs of people accessing the foodbank can at times remain unmet (also observed in Tarasuk and Eakin, 2003), resulting in feelings of guilt and frustration as a volunteer:

Field Notes

7 February 2014

There were a total of 14 vouchers today (a lot!) to feed 20 people, 6 of whom were children. I’m absolutely shattered at the end. I’ve been up and down the stairs carrying kilogram after 65 kilogram of food all morning. It’s really exhausting, in all ways. I tried to carry more bags than Ronnie as he must be in his 70s and I don’t want him to tire himself out too much. I check the amount of food we have given out today and I’m shocked to see we gave out over 240 kilograms of food today – no wonder my back is aching! [...] I got upset today when I got back to the office. It felt really desperate to be handing out food parcels that weren’t complete as we have a shortage of food, and I was scrabbling around the food cupboard, trying to find little treats or extras to go in each parcel to make up for there being no bags of sugar or tinned spaghetti.

A sense of shared guilt would be experienced by the volunteers in these situations, and everyone would chip in with tips of where to find the cheapest bags of sugar, or the juice that was on special offer, in the hope that we could restock the cupboards before the next red voucher. As a consequence of these shared experiences, emotions, and relationships, I have developed a deep attachment to the organization, along with experiences of discomfort and guilt about analysing and presenting findings from the research. This is related to how the other volunteers may perceive this, but also in terms of how foodbank use tends to be presented in government rhetoric and the challenges associated with this discourse.

Developing and maintaining relationships with the volunteers at the foodbank has been just as important as the relationships I have forged with foodbank users. The regularity of my fieldwork on a weekly basis has meant that the more time I have spent volunteering at the foodbank, the more I have become accepted as an “insider”, despite the absence of religion in my life. The other

volunteers share family photographs with me, I hug them when I have not seen them for a while, and they ask to see my holiday photographs. I find myself spending more time with them than I do with most members of my family. I look forward to seeing them every week. There is a concern that in sharing my findings with the volunteers, these relations could change. I am no longer “Kayleigh the volunteer”, but “Dr Garthwaite the researcher”. The power dynamics immediately shift. I have discussed my findings throughout the project with the volunteers, as it is important for me to portray the foodbank in the most representative way. I bring in newspaper cuttings featuring the research, a journal article, the evidence submission for the House of Commons Select Committee into benefits sanctions that I gave evidence to. I have also offered to do a presentation in the church based on my findings. I have struggled with “defining” my colleagues/research participants both as friends and as “subjects of analysis”, leading to feelings of guilt when applying critical theory to the conversations we have shared, as Gilmore and Kenny (2015, p. 18) both found in their experiences of ethnographic research.

It is natural that a person adopting a role of an academic researcher, who participates to some degree in the life of the organization, would influence the setting. This is recognized in debates on organizational research (Wray-Bliss, 2003; Yanow, 2009), and authors stress that a researcher’s task is to make this engagement and influence explicit in the resulting account. When the foodbank manager was absent, the other volunteers turned to me to ask for guidance, perhaps reflecting a belief that my academic role made me somehow more suitable to take the lead, but also a trust in me that I “knew what I was doing”:

Field Notes

7 February 2014

It was really busy today; there were only 6 of us volunteering. I was considered to be the most experienced by the others as I can remember what goes in the food parcel without looking at the sheet! Normally Angie and I put the parcels up upstairs, but most of the other volunteers don’t due to the steep stairs and heavy lifting involved. I was the only one who knew how to work the scales. Today everyone was asking me where things were, what they should do – I’ve only been here two months [...]

On occasion, volunteers would come to me advice on matters relating to the Citizens Advice Bureau, such as debt, or benefit delays and changes. I would always find the relevant information that was being asked of me, and signpost people to the information they needed. I did this not only as a researcher but also as I wanted to help people out who were now close to me. While remaining affiliated to one's university, the organizational ethnographer also joins a new organization (Gilmore and Kenny, 2015). Like Gilmore and Kenny (2015), in my role as "volunteer ethnographer" in the foodbank I have enjoyed a sense of warmth, belonging and collectivity that came with being amongst new-found colleagues.

However, the downside of this is evident when I return to my academic role. For instance, I have been involved in many conversations with the volunteers about how they believe some people on low incomes can have an inability to budget, shop, and cook "properly" – ideas that can align with some of the negative rhetoric surrounding foodbank use, and which I am critical of. Discomfort therefore emerges from having to put a "critical lens" on people I have become close to, and also having to maintain an emotional distance in writing up my findings in order to achieve the levels of objectivity and detachment required to produce meaningful reflections:

Field Notes
10 July 2014

Yesterday was our first steering group meeting, and the first time I have presented on my foodbank fieldwork. Angie, the foodbank manager, is part of our steering group, and beforehand I found myself getting nervous about what she would think of my presentation. I am critical of the idea that people use foodbanks as a lifestyle choice, yet I know the two of us have had chats before where Angie has said that sometimes, people can end up at the foodbank because of poor choices. The presentation went well, Angie seemed happy, and afterwards she said she'd enjoyed it, but I still felt slightly strange presenting findings in front of someone that I was talking about, and who can take a different view to me.

Participant observation is therefore inherently "messy, complicated, and often emotionally fraught interactions between two or more human beings, one of whom is the researcher" (Hume and Mulcock, 2004, p. xviii). Adopting the different roles of ethnographer and volunteer means it is

inevitable that the boundaries between those roles would at times become blurred. This raises questions of levels of objectivity – can I truly be an “objective” researcher in this context? It is highly unlikely. Objectivity, however, in ethnography, as in any qualitative research, has been heavily critiqued (Harding, 1996). Ethnographers are caught in the quandary of being empirical researchers trying to figure out something about a reality “out there” and, on the other hand, working with a “soft” subject area in which interpretation, understanding, and even solidarity can be seen as central notions.

Yet in allowing the data to speak for itself, concerns over objectivity can be assuaged. As Becker (2008, p. 85) stated: “Careful description of details, unfiltered by our ideas and theories, produces observations that, not fitting those categories, require us to create new ideas and categories into which they can be fitted without forcing”. Ethnographers often find themselves in liminal situations, standing at the edge of different worlds and experiencing the blurred hyphen-space between themselves and the “others” (Fine, 1994, Cunliffe and Karunanayake, 2013). The location of the ethnographer in-between various social groups and psychological states often leaves researchers at the margins; this is doubly so when considering the “volunteer ethnographer” role.

In order to negotiate the complexities of this liminality, ethnographers should adopt a stance of curiosity and openness to the unexpected without any expectation that these feelings will be resolved (Lindlof and Taylor 2011). Like Ortiz (2004, p. 480) I have experienced insecurity and anxiety about collecting “enough” data or the “right” data in order to fully understand how the foodbank operates, particularly in terms of the health of people accessing the foodbank. A related point here is how to continue and maintain relationships once I have left the field. Tinney (2008, p. 203) asks: “Where, in an area of such crying need, does the responsible ethnographer draw the line and limit participation to remain an ethically responsible observer and reporter?” I stopped collecting data at the end of April 2015. Both myself and the other volunteers were reluctant for this to happen, as the following extract from my field diary shows:

Field Notes
10 April 2015

Bryan and Carol were both asking when my last day is – it's in two weeks. Every time I think about finishing, I start getting emotional! It's been such a rewarding, difficult, inspiring, sad, eye opening, welcoming, challenging 18 months, and I don't want it to end, but I know it has to. I need to start writing about what I've found and thinking about it in a critical way, and the only way to do that properly is to bring the fieldwork to an end.

It is vital for me to remain connected to what is happening at the foodbank as I continue to analyse and write the findings of the research, as I feel it is important not to just completely dissolve the close relationships I have forged with the other volunteers and the foodbank. Ortiz (2004, p. 480) reported feeling "surrounded" and describes how he "was often pulled back in by the never-ending media coverage" of the realm of professional sports which he studied. Foodbank use is now a daily occurrence in the mass media, and shows little sign of disappearing from popular thought. Therefore, there is a danger that I will get "pulled back in" as foodbank use continues to grow, and their media presence continues to escalate, in much the same way described by Ortiz (2004).

Conclusion

This paper has raised a number of important themes for discussion, including how as an ethnographer I have integrated into the organization I am studying. As Gilmore and Kenny (2015) observe, organizational ethnographers leave their work in the university, and go to work in a second organization. The ethnographer continues to engage in practices and norms of academic work and remains a member of the university. At the same time, during the period in the field the ethnographer is required to become proficient in the ways of the new organization and must attempt to accept the norms and ways of working that are inherent. This has been particularly relevant to me given the politicized discourse of foodbanking and how this has been popularised within the mass media. Reporting the findings of the ethnographic fieldwork I have undertaken in a reflective yet (as far as possible) objective way is therefore highly important.

This paper has shown how being a “volunteer ethnographer” in a foodbank poses its own tensions and considerations. Not only have I negotiated my role as volunteer ethnographer, but also the organizational “fit” of the Trussell Trust within government rhetoric surrounding foodbank use in the UK and how as a volunteer I am part of this.

Negotiating emotions, anxiety and attachment have all been part of the “volunteer ethnographer” journey. Applying a “critical lens” to people I have formed relationships with throughout the research raises uncomfortable questions for me as ethnographer in terms of objectivity and reflexive practice. All of these factors must be situated within a wider complex and “politicized” discourse surrounding foodbank use in order to accurately report how the foodbank operates in an objective yet truly reflective way.

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